**Anthropology of Ontologies**

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**Abstract**

The turn to ontology, often associated with the recent works of Philippe Descola,

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Bruno Latour, but also emerging in many other places, is, in Elizabeth Povinelli’s formulation, “symptomatic” and “diagnostic” of something. It is, I here argue, a response to the sense that sociocultural anthropology, founded in the footsteps of a broad humanist “linguistic” turn, a field that takes social construction as the special kind of human reality that frames its inquiries, is not fully capable of grappling with the kinds of problems that are confronting us in the so called Anthropocene –an epoch in which human and nonhuman kinds and futures have become increasingly entangled to the extent that ethical and political problems can no longer be treated as exclusively human problems. Attending to these requires new conceptual tools, something that a non-reductionistic, ethnographically inspired, ontological anthropology might be in a privileged position to provide.

**Keywords**

Ontology, Anthropological Theory, Anthropocene, Multinaturalism

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*While philosophy as a field was totally dependent on the concept of modernity, it appeared to me that anthropology could be an entry into the contemporary: precisely because it took ontology seriously at last. Not as symbolic representation. Not as those beliefs left on the wrong side of the modernizing frontier. But as a life and death struggle to have the right to stand in one’s own time and place.*

Bruno Latour (2014a)

**Introduction**

I here discuss the turn to ontology in sociocultural anthropology. This turn, narrowly defined, is closely tied to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s “multinaturalism,” and a series of conversations around his work. In the context of North American anthropology this turn is sometimes thought of as a “French” turn (Kelly 2014), which would, in addition, involve the recent works of Philippe Descola and Bruno Latour whose separate and original ontological projects are nonetheless in close dialogue with Viveiros de Castro’s. It is also sometimes thought of as a “European” turn, which would involve the ways in which Viveiros de Castro’s work has been taken up in and around Cambridge, and elsewhere, especially in relation to the work of Marilyn Strathern (1988, 1991, 1995) and Roy Wagner (1981, 1991) (see especially Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007, Holbraad and Pedersen 2009, Holbraad 2012, 2013a, 2013b, Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro 2014; see also Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev 2007, Alberti and Bray 2009, Pedersen 2011, M. Scott 2013, Paleček and Risjord 2013, Morita 2014, Jensen 2014). However, this movement is part of a broader turn to ontology in anthropology that cannot be circumscribed by any single intellectual or social context. If the narrow turn itself, as I will explain, cannot be so easily identified as a coherent movement, then this broader one is even more difficult to identify as such.

Nonetheless the various ontological anthropologies share something important. They are responses to certain conceptual problems and contradictions that arise as anthropological thought faces new challenges. They are, in Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2015) words both “symptomatic” and “diagnostic” of some sort of broader shift; they are reactions, at times explicit, to the specter of a global ecological crisis. This crisis, with all its political valences, all of its attendant imaginaries, and all of the ways in which it is changing our understanding of the relations we humans have to that which is other than human, is “ecologizing” (Latour 2013 [2012]) how we think about politics in many fields ranging from history (Chakrabarty 2009, 2012, 2014) to political theory (Connolly 2013) to literature (Morton 2013). It is also forcing us to recognize that anthropology, as a humanistic science, for all of its insights, lacks some of the conceptual tools needed to face these problems. The turn to ontology in anthropology, then, is, I believe, a response to this broader problem. I here seek to trace some of the contours of a general ethnographically inspired ontological anthropology, both in its narrow and broad iterations, arguing that such an approach is uniquely poised to develop conceptual tools that can be part of an ethical practice that must also include and be transformed by our relation to the nonhuman (Kohn 2014).

For the purposes of this essay I define “ontology” as the study of “reality” –one that encompasses but is not limited to humanly constructed worlds. One could, alternatively, reserve the word “ontology” for the study of Being, in the Heideggerian sense and use “ontic” for reality, or one could think of ontology in terms of “becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 [1980]). One could also, as some do, think of ontology in terms of the variable sets of historically contingent assumptions through which humans apprehend reality –a position that can make ontology nearly synonymous with culture (see Venkatesan et al. 2010).

An important related word is “metaphysics,” which I define as the systemic attention to or the development of more or less consistent and identifiable styles or forms of thought that change our ideas about the nature of “reality.” Metaphysics is thus concerned with concepts. And, crucially, a metaphysics is not necessarily an epistemology. That is, it is not necessarily concerned with knowledge and its objects. There are variants of the turn to ontology that are metaphysical but not ontological, as I have defined the term (e.g., Viveiros de Castro 2014 [2009], Holbraad 2012, Skafish n.d.). That is, these approaches systematically explore forms of thought without necessarily making claims about “reality” –forms of thought that also demonstrate that any reality claim is itself either distinct to one metaphysical framework, often associated with the West, or the product of a clash of metaphysical frameworks. If there is a “reality” here –and this is a term these metaphysically-oriented ontological anthropologists tend to avoid– it is inherently relational, comparative or recursive (Holbraad 2012, 2013a).

There are also ontological forms of anthropology that are *not* metaphysical. That is, they explore modes of being “made over” by realities not fully circumscribed by human worlds. They cultivate representational crafts that can amplify such transformations –holding, perhaps, that any systemic conceptual account of these modes would “deflect” (Diamond 2008) our attention away from the actual possibility of being made over. One could call this approach an ontological poetics. It involves cultivating representational forms (poetics) that can tap into to some sort of broader generative creativity (poesis). In this sense Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel’s (2012) experimental ethnographic film *Leviathan*, which takes placeon, around, as well as under and above a deep-sea fishing vessel, is an example of anthropology as ontological poetics. Multiple cameras attached to bodies, thrust under water, or mounted on different parts of the ship disrupt any singular human perspective or narrative. The result is a disturbing dissolution of the self as we become enveloped in a monstrous marine world of piscine creatures, reeling boats, butchered bodies and diving gulls. *Leviathan* presents no argument and certainly no metaphysics; rather it dissolves many of the conceptual structures that hold us together so that we can be made over by the unexpected entities and forces that emerge from the depths (see Stevenson and Kohn 2015). The cultivation of representational craft as a way of becoming attuned to other kinds of realities, a hallmark of what I am calling ontological poetics, is also evident in the writing of McLean (2009), Raffles (2012), Stewart (2012), Stevenson (2014), and Pandian (2015).

There are, in addition, ontological approaches concerned with Being in a human sense (e.g., Jackson 1989) and its “becoming” under adverse conditions (Biehl and Locke 2010). Because its explorations are largely limited to the human in terms of the human, it is not a focus of this essay. Nonetheless, this approach can speak to distinctively human moral worlds in ways that can also be cognizant of the historically given sets of ontological assumptions that might frame these (Zigon 2014).

If we accept that ontology concerns the study of reality, ontological anthropology becomes a particular but capacious way of studying reality that takes into account two key elements of our field: one methodological, the other theoretical. The major methodological innovation of our field is, of course, ethnography by which I mean a practice of immersive engagement with the everyday messiness of human lives and the broader worlds in which humans live, as well as the various more or less reflexive forms of voicing attention to that practice. By being ethnographic, and by developing conceptual resources out of this engagement, ontological anthropology, as I will discuss below, makes a unique contribution to what might otherwise seem to be a topic best reserved for philosophy. The methodological focus also delimits the subject matter. Ontological anthropology is not generically about “the world,” and it never fully leaves humans behind. It is about what we learn about the world and the human through the ways in which humans engage with the world. And attention to such engagements often undoes any bounded notion of what the human is. Ontological anthropology is, for the most part post-humanist but that does not mean that it sidesteps humans and human concerns altogether.

Anthropology’s defining theoretical contribution is the culture concept, broadly construed, and ontological anthropology grapples critically and conceptually with its affordances and limitations in sophisticated ways. The culture concept is an anthropological refinement of a broader linguistic, epistemological, representational, or correlational turn in philosophy. That turn, often associated with Immanuel Kant, shifts philosophical attention away from questions about the substance of the world itself to those conditions under which humans know or represent the world (Meillassoux 2008 [2006]). In the social sciences and anthropology, beginning with the largely mutually independent efforts of Émile Durkheim and Franz Boas, this attention to epistemology is channeled in ways that explicitly or implicitly work with some of the ontological properties of linguistic representation. The hallmark of modern anthropology, as prefigured by these two scholars, is the recognition of the reality of phenomena that we can term “socially constructed.” Socially constructed phenomena are the product of contingent and conventional contexts, be they historical, social, cultural, or linguistic. The circular, reciprocal, co-constitutive nature of these constructions makes them language-like, regardless of whether the items related are explicitly treated as linguistic. The Boasian approach, however, is tied to language in a fairly explicit way (e.g., Boas 1889; see Stocking 1974:58-59). This is evident in Geertz’s symbolic anthropology (Geertz 1973a) as well as its critiques (Clifford and Marcus 1986), which draw attention to the constructed nature of anthropological representations themselves, and thus amplify the linguistic even as they incorporate more sophisticated analyses of power and history. Durkheim’s approach (1938 [1895]), although not linguistic in name, explores elements of social life that are essentially symbolic. His definition of a social fact bears all the formal properties of a symbolic representational system such as human language in which relata are produced by and contribute to the system through which they relate –a system that achieves a kind of closure, totality, and separation by virtue of this special kind of relationality. I designate as “cultural” any entity that is treated as exhibiting such properties, regardless of whether or not it is so named.

In the contemporary French tradition this linguistic turn is much more explicit, influenced as it is by the semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure (1986 [1916]), especially as it was taken up by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The Saussurean tradition sees the sign, of which the human linguistic sign is considered the prime example, as both arbitrary and conventional. It is arbitrary in the sense that it has no direct connection to or motivation from its object of reference, and conventional, in the sense that its meaning or referential value is fixed instead by a set of codified relations it has to other such signs in the system of signs. One result of this take on language is that we get a sharp division between the world of signs and the world to which those signs refer without an account of how these might be connected. This is a problem for any anthropological approach that relies on Saussure for its theory of representation (Keane 2003). Lévi-Strauss saw the dualism that the Saussurean gap implies as *the* human problem, and it is evident also in the works of heirs to this structuralist tradition such as Michel Foucault. When Foucault (1970 [1966]), for example, writes that “life itself” was unthinkable before the historical conditions that made such a concept possible, he is reflecting the human reality that this broader turn to language and social construction reveals at the same time that he is voicing the difficulty, given an analytical framework built on human language, to conceptualize that which is outside of language or culture.

My version of ontological anthropology, based on the ethnography of human relations to rainforest beings in Ecuador’s Upper Amazon, addresses the problem of language directly (Kohn 2013). I argue that the best way to reconfigure anthropology’s relationship to language is through the ethnographic study of how humans communicate with a host of nonhuman beings in a world that is itself communicative but not symbolic or linguistic. This allows us to see language “from the outside,” so to speak, by looking at its relationship to a broader series of forms of communication that are representational but not language-like, and whose unique properties emerge ethnographically at the same time as they reveal what makes language special. The semiotic framework that is helpful here is that of 19th century philosopher and logician Charles Peirce (e.g., Peirce 1955), rather than Saussure’s, because it can situate human representational processes vis-à-vis nonhuman ones (Hoffmeyer 1996, 2008, Hornborg 1996, Deacon 1997) in ways that allow for what Peirce calls the “Outward Clash” (cited in Keane 2003) with that which lies beyond human forms of representation. I am interested in understanding how these kinds of realities make us over once the grip of language is loosened. I argue that doing this is crucial for anthropology, since it reveals how so many of our conceptual assumptions (e.g., about difference, context, relationality and commensurability) are drawn from language and its properties, even in post-humanist approaches. Getting right this relationship of language to non-language, especially via the route of the representational-but-not-linguistic, as revealed in the complex communicative ecologies of tropical forests, will, I believe, help us create the conceptual resources we will need as we learn to “ecologize.”

The broad ontological turn in anthropology has an affinity with a related turn today in philosophy, which is also trying to free itself from the Kantian reorientation of philosophy as the study of human thought. This orientation has, according to Quentin Meillassoux (2008 [2006]), kept philosophy from appreciating what he calls the “great outdoors” –the world beyond human representation (see also Bryant 2011; Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011; Harman 2012).

I do not think it is warranted to see the turn to language, which provides the foundations for anthropology, as “wrong.” Quite the opposite; it gets at something fundamental about the *reality* of human life. It too, in this sense is ontological. And yet by attending to a certain aspect of reality it forecloses attention to others. So, in brief, ontological anthropology, as I define it, is the non-reductive ethnographic exploration of realities that are not necessarily socially constructed in ways that allow us to do conceptual work with them. I see this as a response to a conceptual, existential, ethical and political problem –how to think about human life in a world in which a kind of life and future that is both beyond the human and constitutive of the human is, today, in jeopardy.

**The Broad Turn to Ontology**

If culture is that which is socially constructed, then “nature,” whatever it is, can be defined as that which is not. Of course the *idea* of nature is certainly historically contingent and need not exist at a given time or in a given place. And yet ontological anthropologists would hold that an exclusive focus on social construction, such that, if we can talk about nature, it is only as culture, is a problem.

There are many anthropologists whose work refuses that solution in ways that orient their work toward ontology. Many of these precede the narrow turn to ontology. Gregory Bateson (2000 [1972], 2002 [1979]), in his insistence on looking at humans as parts of larger “ecologies of mind,” and who saw a global environmental crisis as the consequence of our inability to grasp these broader relations is one important ontological anthropologist.

Ontological concerns seem to be difficult to avoid in certain arenas of inquiry. As much as our anthropological responsibility is to demonstrate the historical construction of nature or landscape or forests (Balée 1989, Raffles 2002), there are also forces that move in the other direction, and conceptualizing these is somehow inescapable when dealing anthropologically with the environment or ecology (Helmreich 2009, Choy 2011). Similarly, as important as it is to focus on the social life of things (Appadurai 1986), there is something about ethnographic attention to materiality that problematizes the relationship between human (social) subjects and nonhuman objects (Miller 2005). And when anthropologists turn their attention to medicine, as important as it is to use the analytic of social construction to question the authority of medical and scientific knowledge and institutions, there is something about the body that forces them on to ontological terrain (Lock 1993; Mol 2002; Thompson 2007; Roberts 2014). And, although attention to embodied experience has largely been a humanistic concern (Jackson 1996), phenomenology provides one way to break down distinctions between humans and nonhumans by bypassing the messy problem of humanly exceptional forms of representation (Ingold 2000, 2007, 2011; see also Hallowell 1960). Finally, if religion can be treated as a cultural system (Geertz 1973b [1966]), taking spirits seriously forces us onto ontological terrain (Chakrabarty 2000, Singh 2015).

Latour, especially in his development, along with others, of what has come to be known as Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Latour 1988 [1984], Callon, Law, and Ripp 1986, Callon 1999 [1986]) has been central in allowing anthropologists working with nonhumans, the environment, materiality, medicine, science, technology, and the body, a way to bring nature into culture and culture into nature and much of the broader turn to ontology in our field relies in some way or another on this framework. ANT is sometimes thought of methodologically as “symmetrical anthropology” (Latour 1993 [1991]: 103) in its refusal to give explanatory priority to one actor or entity over another; its metaphysical correlate would be a “flat ontology,” (Bryant 2011): the world is the product of many kinds of agencies, none of which is necessarily more important than any other. ANT seeks to overcome the mind/body dualism by assuming that everything has mind-like agential as well as matter-like properties. This kind of relationality, where relata do not precede their relating, has a Saussurean flavor to it, and is treated as explicitly language-like in some versions of Science and Technology Studies (see Law and Mol 2008:58).

Even if she would resist appeals to the gendered authoritative foundations that terms like metaphysics and ontology can imply, Donna Haraway is one of the most important voices in the anthropological turn to ontology. As a trained biologist she insists on the responsibility of getting the sciences “right,” even as she interrogates Science’s claims to truth – questioning any sharp line between fact and “fabulation” (Haraway 1991a, 1991b). And she is dedicated to living well with other kinds of beings, something that she draws from her daily life with her canine companions (Haraway 2003, 2008). She holds these commitments in generative tension with a sensitive attunement to politics and history. She has a complex and subtle engagement with the Marxian and feminist tradition that allows her to track power, desire and the gendered historical structures that channel these. In short, if the turn to ontology is criticized for being apolitical, reactionary, too focused on exotic alters (Bessire and Bond 2014) –a claim with some foundation but one that I will critically evaluate in my discussion of the narrow turn against which it is raised– then it is certainly not one that can be leveled against Haraway. And Haraway’s project is profoundly ontological in the sense that she insists on getting other kinds of beings into our anthropological accounts with the hopes of imagining and enacting a kind of ethics and politics that can make room for these other kinds of beings. Haraway’s approach has been extended in “multi-species ethnography” (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010), which takes on the question of what kind of hope is possible in what Anna Tsing (2014) calls “blasted landscapes” (see Kirksey 2014; for explorations related to transgender, gender, and race see Hayward 2013, Weaver 2013, and Agard-Jones 2013).

**The Narrow Ontological Turn**

The narrow ontological turn associated with the recently translated books of Descola (2013 [2005]) Viveiros de Castro (2014 [2009]), and Latour (2013 [2012]) is in some ways a French turn. And it is the one that is producing the most interest (and anxiety) in North American anthropology. This turn shares with so much of anthropology certain assumptions about representation that come from Saussurean linguistics as it was adopted by Lévi-Strauss. These assumptions are evident even in the various critiques these approaches pose to social construction. Lévi-Strauss, however, is important in another way. He is, perhaps, the original ontological anthropologist in his insistence that native thought is conceptual in its own right, and in ways that undermine western metaphysical concepts (Lévi-Strauss 1966), and also in his even more radical insistence that thought itself (which becomes visible in our anthropological attempts to think with the thoughts of others) reveals ontological properties of the universe (Lévi-Strauss 1992 [1955]: 56). If I refer to the recent work of Descola, Viveiros de Castro, and Latour as the “narrow” ontological turn, it is in no way to disparage it as limited. One goal of this essay is to appreciate just how varied and sophisticated their projects are.

***Descola’s* Beyond Nature and Culture**

All three projects are grappling with the consequences of Descola’s dissolution of the category of nature as the ground for anthropological inquiry and his recuperation, based on his work among the Amazonian Achuar, of animism. Animism is no longer treated as the mistaken belief in an animated nature (Tylor 1871) but as form of extending social relationality to nonhumans in ways that imply a set of ontological assumptions quite different from the one from which anthropology traditionally works (Descola 1994 [1986], 1996; Latour 1993 [1991]; Bird-David 1990, Harvey 2005; Willerslev 2007, 2012; C. Scott 2013). This leads each of the three authors to critiques of social construction as the sole way to account for difference. These critiques are structuralist: argumentation involves contrastive opposites (but see Viveiros de Castro 1999:S80; Viveiros de Castro 2014 [2009]: 209) and difference and relationality enjoy metaphysical primacy.

Descola additionally shares with Lévi-Strauss an emphasis on broad ethnological comparison and the formalist insistence that the apparent infinite diversity of the ways in which people live in relation to others is the product of more finite ways of apprehending and construing these relations. For Descola (2013 [2005]) these constraints are cognitive and logical (cf. Lévy-Bruhl 1926 [1910]). One understands others (be they human or nonhuman) by self-comparison. In doing so there are only certain formal possibilities, and these lead to sets of ontological assumptions that then become stabilized in certain historical contexts.

By comparison to oneself an other can be understood to have similar interiorities and dissimilar exteriorities. This orients what Descola terms “animism,” which, as an ideal type is visible among many indigenous societies in the Amazon and in the boreal regions of North America. The animist holds that all beings are persons (animals and spirits have a kind of interiority or selfhood that is comparable to that of human persons) but these beings are differentiated by their exteriorities –the bodies that these various kinds of persons inhabit. This is why a shaman can become a jaguar by wearing as clothing elements of the feline body, such as the canine teeth and spotted hides, which make jaguars distinctive predatory beings. There is a psychic continuity that permits movement across physical discontinuities.

The assumption that others have dissimilar interiorities but similar exteriorities orients what Descola calls “naturalism,” which is typical of the modern West. Here a unique interiority is privileged as the marker of difference. This is visible at a number of levels: the individual (where solipsism and the problem of other minds are philosophical problems); the group (where culture, not “race” is the important variable); and the species (regarding which only the human one enjoys genuine interiority). It is only with naturalism that “nature” as an object external to our subjective selves is conceivable.

The assumption that others have similar interiorities and similar exteriorities orients what Descola calls “totemism,” which is best exemplified by certain Australian aboriginal societies, where others share both an interiority and an exteriority within specific human/nonhuman hybrid collectives. Here the distinctions between interiority and exteriority break down. What instead becomes important is the continual investment by humans and nonhumans in maintaining and capacitating a shared world (see Povinelli 2015).

Finally, the attribution of dissimilar interiorities and dissimilar exteriorities orients what Descola calls “analogism,” which, historically, is widely distributed throughout Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Faced with the prospect of radical incommensurability, the analogist creates logical groupings among entities she otherwise suspects have no relation to each other. Matrices of cardinal directions, maps, chains of being, and microcosms are all attempts by analogists to control the perceived chaos of the world by imposing order onto to it.

Descola’s approach has been criticized as merely taxonomic, and thus a version either of his analogism (Viveiros de Castro 2014 [2009]: 83), his naturalism (Fischer 2014: 334), or as an elaborate misrecognition of the human propensity to attribute culture to all entities, which would make the West unique only in its denial of this fact –a critique that would seem to vindicate anthropology’s celebration of the culture concept as its enduring analytic (Sahlins 2014). However, Descola’s work provides one way to think about variations in ontological assumptions without explaining these in cultural terms (if it they were cultural there would be many more than four variants). Furthermore, it does so in a way that can account for how such assumptions can realize possible worlds by selectively actualizing certain properties inherent to the world beyond human cognition (Kohn and Descola 2009; Descola 2010; Descola 2014). It can also help us understand how the specific differences each set of assumptions has relative to the others can affect the interactional dynamics among any of them.

***Viveiros de Castro’s* Cannibal Metaphysics**

Viveiros de Castro’s (2014 [2009]) metaphysics grows from his masterful comparative synthesis of the vast Amazonian ethnological literature that permits him to identify the “perspectival” quality of so much of Amerindian thought (1998 [1996]). Many Amazonians subscribe to some version of the following perspectival logic: under normal circumstances humans see humans as humans, animals as animals, and spirits (if they see them) as spirits. But predatory beings such as jaguars and spirits will see humans as prey, and prey animals (such as wild pigs) will see humans as predators. Furthermore all beings, human, animal, or spirit, will see themselves as persons. So, from an *I* perspective a jaguar will see himself as a human person. He will experience himself as drinking manioc beer, living in a thatch house, etc., but he will be seen by other kinds of beings, such as humans (under normal circumstances) and prey animals, from an external *It* perspective, namely as a predatory being. All beings, from their own perspectives, see things in the same way –jaguars like humans, see themselves drinking manioc beer– but, crucially, what they see in this same way, is a *different* world. And yet this can only be known comparatively by grasping how those on the outside see us (when one is drinking manioc beer one never knows if that beer is “just” beer or if it is the blood of one’s enemies –this sort of knowledge is only available by comparison to an external perspective).

Viveiros de Castro’s reflections on perspectivism lead him to conclude that we are dealing here with a metaphysics that is fundamentally different from that which informs western academic thought, including anthropology. Taking this seriously by doing conceptual work with its implications distorts the anthropological project and posits a radical critique of the social construction at its heart. It allows him to see more clearly the ways in which anthropology is founded on a Nature/Culture divide that posits nature as a sort of universal, unitary, and existent ground, and culture as the infinitely variable form of representing it. This binary is what has traditionally allowed anthropological comparison. We stabilize or bracket out nature in order to compare cultural (or historical or social) differences. Viveiros de Castro calls this western metaphysical framework “multiculturalist” (many cultures but one nature). And it is a logic that persists even in “postmodern” frameworks that retain the socio-historical contingency even as they erase the natural ground. The Amerindian style of thought, by contrast, allows him to posit an alternative metaphysics that he terms “multinaturalist.” Seen as multinaturalist the Amerindian style of thinking would hold that there are many natures, each made up of the set of affects particular to a given kind of body, but only one culture.

An anthropology based as it is on a multicultural metaphysical distinction between nature and culture does not work in a region where nature and culture take on very different properties. If, for example, one makes the multiculturalist statement that, “Amazonians *believe* that animals are persons” where belief marks the epistemological or representational status of the claim, then one is not only ignoring the metaphysical assumptions upon which Amazonians relate to other kinds of beings as persons but, worse, one is forcing these to conform to another set of metaphysical assumptions, one in which such ideas are merely beliefs, or social constructed representations.

Perspectivism has tremendous ethnological traction. It clarifies and unites a series of ethnographic observations on, for example, ethnonyms, kinship, predation,

shamanism, clothing and bodily adornment, and relations to nonhumans. As a form of relating in which the other is integral to the self, whites figure prominently (Kohn 2002, 2013, Viveiros de Castro 2004, Vilaça 2010 [2006],). But *Cannibal Metaphysics* is not just a metaphysics of so called “cannibals” but a kind of metaphysics of predation, in the broadest of terms. It can ingest our own metaphysical assumptions by, for example, revealing the ways in which we privilege the Thing-in-Itself even as we focus on the variable and partial modes through which it is apprehended. For, in multinaturalism there are no self-identical entities such as, to return to a previous example, beer or blood; beer might always be a kind of blood, and blood, beer-like for somebody (2014 [2009]: 73). Multinaturalism, then, takes the comparison inherent to perspectivism –for a characteristic of perspectival thinking is that one perspective can hold together multiple irreducible worlds– and asks what it would be like if we saw everything as potentially generatively comparative.

Appreciating things multinaturally allows us to see my definition of ontology as the study of “reality” as already multiculturally determined. If nature is our ground it is natural for us to think of ontology as a search for what really exists. But in a multinatural metaphysics there is no stable ontological ground. The shaman walking through the forest does not ask whether spirits exist (that would be the multicultural question), he only wants to know how to actualize a relation with them. By extending this logic beyond Amazonia, anthropology, in Viveiros de Castro’s hands, becomes a practice of cosmic philosophical predation that might allow us to actualize a multinaturalism immanent in the bowels of multiculturalism itself (Viveiros de Castro 2014 [2009]: 93). It thus becomes a way to arrive at genuinely alter concepts (see also Hage 2012), derived “otherwise” to (although not necessarily outside) our metaphysics (Povinelli 2012).

Critics of Viveiros de Castro have emphasized the excessive generalization of his high structuralist framework, for not all Amazonians, let alone “Amerindians,” are perspectivists (Ramos 2012; Turner 2009). They have also argued that the politics of multinaturalism is too broad and generically oriented towards global issues (such as the Anthropocene; see Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2014) to capture the everyday political struggles of Amazonian peoples (Ramos 2012, Bessire and Bond 2014), and that speaking for Amerindian ontologies from the outside is politically suspect (Todd 2014; Salmond 2014; but see Kopenawa and Albert 2013 [2010] for an elaborate Amazonian alter-metaphysics, quite resonant with multinaturalism, authored by a Yanomami shaman and political activist).

What to make of the potential theoretical and political relevance of a style of thought that a) may not be characteristic of all “Amerindians” and b) even if it does characterize some of them, may have little relevance to the, “political situations regarding the predicament of indigenous peoples in adverse interethnic contexts” (Ramos 2012: 483)? The Amazon is becoming increasingly deforested and increasingly incorporated into national and global political economies and anthropology should not lose sight of this complex reality. In such a context what bearing might Amazonian perspectival ideas, drawn from seemingly timeless cosmologies (now fragmented) and sylvan ways of life (now receding in the face of more potent economic forces) have to do with the everyday lives of people in the Amazon (Bessire and Bond 2014)?

Viveiros de Castro’s project should not however be casually dismissed. One cannot say that what we need is more attention to “indigenous epistemologies” on par with academic ones on a level “cross-cultural” playing field (Ramos 2012:486) because this would domesticate Amazonian thought by framing it in terms of a western metaphysics in which concepts are cultural or epistemological. Critiques of his project should critically engage his critique of culture and epistemology

Perspectivism certainly resonates with and illuminates my own ethnographic material drawn from everyday life among the Quichua-speaking Runa of Ecuador’s Upper Amazon. Is this not one successful test of anthropological abstraction? But Viveiros de Castro is aiming for something even more general involving concepts (Viveiros de Castro 2014 [2009]: 192). Of crucial importance here is the recognition that concepts can have a certain kind of referential freedom and that concept work is not the exclusive domain of philosophers (Skafish 2014a). Amazonian peoples, like all peoples, have concepts, and Viveiros de Castro’s project involves further developing concepts, such as multinaturalism, out of a set of perspectival Amazonian concepts. One might wish to be critical of this kind of concept work as too abstracted from local political concerns, but one would also have to be critical of, say, Marilyn Strathern’s (1988) feminist anthropological classic, *The Gender of the Gift*, which similarly derives anthropological concepts from Melanesian concepts to think with and against certain western forms of thinking, involving nature, gender, the person, scale, and relationality.

Crucial to these concerns about concepts –are they too general, ethnographically valid, politically relevant?– is the question of alterity. Viveiros de Castro’s goal is to capacitate and extend a fragile style of perspectival thought alter to western metaphysics. And the narrow turn holds that, although such forms of alter-thinking need not lie outside the West or modernity (see Pandolfo 2007, 2008; Pedersen 2011; Skafish 2011, n.d.) there *is* a western metaphysics against which these can be juxtaposed (Skafish 2014b), and that much anthropological theory is framed by such a western metaphysics, even though anthropology’s method of inquiry places our field in a position to deform it by being itself deformed by the different forms of thought it encounters.

Anthropology certainly has a nostalgic relation to the kinds of alterity that certain historical forces (which have also played a role in creating our field) have destroyed. To recognize this is one thing. It is quite another to say that for this reason there is no longer any conceptual space alter to the logic of this kind of domination. For this would be the final act of colonization, one that would subject the possibility of something else, located in other lived worlds, human and otherwise, to a far more permanent death (Kohn 2014). Of course it is valid to examine what emerges once such a metaphysics is dead (Bessire 2014), but this is not Viveiros de Castro’s political project.

One can ask whether it is appropriate to make multinaturalism the sole metaphysics alter to the western one, and Descola’s *Beyond Nature and Culture*, is an attempt to show that there are other kinds of alter metaphysics. One can also ask why the kinds of multiplicities that multinaturalism recognizes fit so conveniently with Deleuzian thought (Vigh and Sausdal 2014: 57), to which Viveiros de Castro counters that Deleuze and Guattari developed much of their thinking from anthropological alter-concepts (2014 [2009]). Or one could ask whether the focus on radical alterity misses what we share (Vigh and Saudal 2014: 57). These are valid concerns and ones that are at times mine as well. But they misunderstand the project. Multinaturalism is not a description of how the world is, or how one kind of person thinks, but a call for a form of thinking, available to anyone, that is able to see possible ways of becoming otherwise. Multinaturalism is not a way of commensurating difference but of communicating “by differences” (Viveiros de Castro 2004:10), recognizing that there is a form of relating that allows differences to be held together rather than to be subsumed. It certainly grows out of certain styles of thinking that ethnography reveals, but it also grows out of the recursive nature of comparative ethnographic thinking itself in which one’s form of thinking is constantly being changed by one’s object of thought (Holbraad 2012, 2013; see also Jensen and Rödje 2010:3).

***Latour’s* Modes of Existence**

Latour’s *Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* (2013 [2012]) and some of his writings on the Anthropocene (Latour 2013, 2014b) are the most forceful articulations of the stakes for the ontological turn. The ecological crisis is the ethical and political problem of our times, one that, in being ecological, changes the nature of ethics and politics. The Anthropocene, puts anthropos at center stage –humans are a force of nature– at the same time that it changes what it means to be human and makes clear that anthropology, now too at center stage, can no longer be just about humans (Latour 2014a). Latour recognizes that although ANT is an important step toward getting humans and nonhumans to be part of the same analytical framework, its very symmetrical nature leaves out value. And value of course is central to any political project. One has to say why “we” should care about ecological problems, but one has to do so in such a way that allows those other “voices” that might make up this common “we” to articulate their values. The *Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* is both a metaphysical and an ontological account that makes room for other modes of existence, at the same time as it offers a way to think about how to live with the kinds of beings such modes institute. Like many of the accounts discussed already, its metaphysics is a kind of a method that responds to the suspicion that too much description may be limiting. Latour’s goal is to recognize, and give dignity to multiple modes of existence, or ontologies, and how the beings such modes institute might find a way to dwell together in a common *oikos*. He does so by tracing out the lightest of metaphysics, one whose descriptions will capacitate, rather than hinder the various modes of existence it thus recognizes. A mode of existence is, for Latour, something that has its own way of being (its own kind of “trajectory”), its own way of nonbeing (its own kind of “hiatus”), and its own, sometimes fragile, conditions under which it can be (its own truth or “felicity conditions,” something he adapts from Austin 1962 but with the hope of extending it beyond its humanistic linguistic usage). Stones, spirits, poetry, and scientific objects, can all be described in this way as having unique and valid modes of existence. If we can allow adherents of any mode to see themselves for who they really are and for what they stand, a process that will involve negotiation with those beings or those who speak for them (Latour’s *Modes of Existence* project, is not just a book, but an interactive website and a series of workshops designed for negotiation with “co- investigors,” who are invited to engage with his descriptions of themselves and those they represent), then anthropology can become a project of cosmic “diplomacy” (a term Latour adapts from Stengers 2011 [1997], 2005). That is, anthropology becomes a privileged vehicle for a special kind of translation. This would not involve recourse to any one ontological foundation (e.g., comparing two cultures by virtue of the equivalent but different ways each represents nature), nor would it be possible to undertake with scientific detachment; for the anthropologist as diplomat is invested in successfully moving among worlds, as she recognizes that our shared survival is at stake in making room for these various modes of existence and what they might have to contribute.

Latour’s project is, as the book’s subtitle indicates, an “anthropology of the moderns.” By which he means that this is an anthropology of western institutions – Science, Law, and Religion being important ones– that have their own metaphysics and their own ways of instituting beings. The idea is that by diplomatically redescribing these, the adherents of each will be able to appreciate themselves and others in terms both of their differences and their common concerns; as they learn to face each other they will learn to face the crisis they share in common. The Moderns here refers not necessarily to a group, say ethnic Europeans, but to those that, in some way or another, subscribe to modernization. And modernizing is the problem for Latour, it is the way in which humans –whether in the guise of capitalism, human exceptionalism, or progress– have become a force that threatens to destroy the plurality of modes of being. His diplomatic effort is part of a critical project that would see “ecologizing” among the pluralities of beings as the antidote to modernizing.

One question that philosopher Patrice Maniglier asks, in one of the most insightful critical syntheses of the project, is, On whose behalf is Latour a diplomat (Maniglier 2014)? (See also Salmon and Charbonnier 2014 for an excellent discussion of the project in relation to Descola). Can one be both the metaphysician of diplomacy and its diplomat? Latour, I think, would respond that he is proposing an experimental method. And the proof of its success would involve the question of whether it eventually proves successful in real diplomatic situations. Another concern involves whether this project is still too symmetrical –providing a liberal forum in which all modes might be able to cohabitate (see Fortun 2014: 315). Here I think it could be productive to extend Latour’s project in light of Haraway’s injunction to take “response-ability” for decisions involving the life but also the death of beings, kinds, and perhaps even modes of existence (Haraway 2008).

**Conclusion**

In sum, the major concerns voiced by the anthropological community with respect to the narrow ontological turn are that it is: 1) excessively structuralist; 2) overly concerned with alterity; and, 3) not sufficiently political. Regarding the first concern, I would say that it is honestly structuralist, as opposed to so much of the rest of our field whose implicit theory of representation, whether avowed or not, is Saussurean, and therefore cryptically structuralist. Regarding the second concern, while it is true that Descola, Viveiros de Castro, and Latour all rely in some way or another on an ethnologically abstracted and historically extracted Other, the question they are asking, namely, Is there a way to recognize and capacitate difference that doesn’t make it fit “exactly inside the same eternal and universal [i.e., Western] patterns of ‘social life’”? (Latour 2014a), is nevertheless a radical and important one. That is, explaining difference in terms of culture, or in terms of political economy, makes it, in Povinelli’s (2001) terms, “doable,” and in that sense makes anthropology, even as a critical practice, an extension of what she would call a late liberal logic (Povinelli 2002).

Perhaps the greatest concern is the final one, that the general turn to ontology is somehow an a-political, or worse, reactionary, project, where the easy politics of a big abstract political problem (we can all care about global warming, a problem that is both everywhere and nowhere), hides all the local problems where political economy cannot be ignored (Bessire and Bond 2014). Must all politics be a local politics, and, if so, is ontological anthropology antithetical to this? I think the answer to these is no; there are important ontological projects that are precisely about politics in local as well as global contexts (see Blaser 2009, de la Cadena 2010, Tsing 2014, Povinelli 2015).

I take the broader turn to ontological anthropology as a theoretically and politically important addition to our discipline –one that should not seek to replace traditional anthropological kinds of critique based on attention to social construction, political economy, and the human, but should rather augment these. Although anthropology as a discipline needs to make conceptual room for ontology, not all anthropology should necessarily be ontological.

My ideal version of an ontological anthropology would be this: *metaphysical*, interested in exploring and developing concepts; *ontological*, attentive to the kinds of realities such concepts can amplify; *poetic*, attuned to the unexpected ways we can be made over by those not necessarily human realities; *humanistic*, concerned with how such realities make their ways into historically contingent human moral worlds; and *political*, concerned with how this kind of inquiry can contribute to an ethical practice that can include and be transformed by the other kinds of beings with whom we share our lives and futures. Such an ideal is perhaps best realized, not by any one scholar, but by a diverse and growing community of ontologically attuned ethnographic thinkers.

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